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ABSTRACT

This paper examines rural-urban differences in parent involvement in their children's education, drawing upon such concepts as "community attachment," "community cultural context," "family cultural capital," and "community social capital." As part of the 1992-93 Missouri School Improvement Program, nearly 57,000 parents whose children attended 296 Missouri schools completed a survey that included five items measuring the extent of parent involvement. Schools were grouped into four categories, based on rural or urban school in metropolitan or nonmetropolitan county. Parent involvement was positively related to socioeconomic status (SES) and parent rating of the accessibility of school staff, and was negatively related to minority status, student grade level, number of children in the family, and single-parent status. When these control variables were held constant, parents whose children attended nonmetro rural schools scored significantly higher on parent involvement than parents in any of the other categories of schools. At the same time, independent of control variables and location of residence, parents who had lived longer within the school district participated more than more recently arrived parents. The effect of SES on parent involvement was greatest in nonmetro rural schools. The results indicate that the effects of individual and contextual characteristics on parent participation can be independent and additive to one another. Contains 22 references. (SV)

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Parental Involvement—A Contrast between Rural and Other Communities

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Parental Involvement—A Contrast between Rural and Other Communities

For decades, the relationship between school and family has been under multi-disciplinary investigation. Recently, a noticeable branch of this research has focused on the issue of "parental involvement" in children's education. Although numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the profound impact of parental involvement on students' scholastic progress (e.g., Clark 1983; Dornbusch et al., 1987; Epstein 1988; Henderson 1981; Miller and Cásserly 1988; Scott-Jones 1984; Stevenson and Baker 1987; Useem 1992), few have dealt with possible differences and/or similarities in parents' practices of involvement between rural and other types of communities. Based on parent survey data collected from a stratified sample of 296 Missouri schools, the current study aims to contrast the extent of parental involvement in rural and other types of schools. In addition, we will also investigate possible interactive effects between geographic location and other demographic factors on parental involvement.

BACKGROUND

Previous Conceptual Models of Parent Involvement

Previous investigators of parental involvement have established at least three major conceptual models. The traditional functionalist approach perceives parents' involvement in children's education as an indicator of the relationship between two basic social institutions of the American society—family and school. In her recent studies, Epstein (1987, 1989, 1991) presents a model of 'overlapping spheres of influence', which emphasizes the functional interdependency among different institutions. For Epstein (1992), families and schools have overlapping responsibilities and the strength of home-school relationship depends on children's age as well as on demographic characteristics, philosophies and practices of each school environment.

A second conceptual approach is well demonstrated by Laureau's case analyses of two California schools. Lareau successfully extends Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" to understand different patterns of parental participation observed across social classes. Different from Bourdieu, Lareau does not limit her conceptualization of cultural capital within the framework

of high status culture. Rather, 'cultural capital' is conceived as tangible or intangible cultural resources available to a family, which, when activated, can be educationally beneficial to the children in the family. Following this argument, the forms and frequency of parental involvement reflect the size of a family's resource pool.

Central to the third conceptual approach to studying parental involvement is James Coleman's notion of "social capital", which Coleman creates in an effort to revise conceptual defects of various sociological and economic explanations of parental involvement. Different from financial capital which is usually in observable and material form, or from human capital which is embodied in certain skills and knowledge, "social capital" "comes through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action" (Coleman 1988:S100). For Coleman, such social capital exists in the inter-personal relations both within and outside of a student's family. Within the family, 'social capital' refers to the relations between children and parents. Thus, if Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' refers to the cultural and intellectual resources available to a family to promote educational progress of its children, Coleman's 'social capital' is the necessary *social structure* within the family (the presence of parents and an intimate parent-child relationship) that facilitates the activation of 'cultural capital'. Outside the family, 'social capital' refers to a family's social network, its relationships with people in the community, with school staff and with the society in large, which can also benefit children's education.

Urban/Rural Differences in "Community Attachment"

Although few studies have seriously compared patterns of parental involvement between urban and rural communities, a large body of sociological work has long focused on urban/rural differences regarding a similar notion, namely, "community attachment". Among the community attachment studies, two conceptual models explicitly stand out (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974; Berry and Kasarda 1977). The linear-development model has its roots in writings of traditional urban sociologists such as Toennies (1887), Durkheim (1892), Simmel (1902), Sumner (1906), and Wirth (1938). Central to this model is the argument that higher levels of urbanism, characterized by large population size and high density, tend to weaken kinship bonds, minimize scope of

primary relationships and accordingly, limit people's attachment to the local community. By contrast, the systemic model, based on writings of Park and Burgess (1921) and Janowitz (1967), emphasizes that local attachment should be a function of time in residence, age and social standing. According to advocates of the systemic model, higher levels of social standing and longer time of residency in the community both provide a wider range of selectivity in social relationships, and accordingly, enhance community attachment (Goudy, 1990).

Location of Residence and Parental Involvement

As mentioned earlier, previous studies have largely treated parental involvement as a function of social and cultural characteristics. This approach ignores the direct impact of living and interacting in a given geographic environment *beyond* influences of individual characteristics. In this study, we hypothesize that residential location has a potential "contextual" effect on frequencies of parents participation in school-related activities, for at least two reasons. First, as Sun et al (under review) point out, for both conceptual and practical reasons, a community, a neighborhood, or a specific geographic locale can all be regarded as mini-cultures or sub-cultures, each having unique cultural values, norms, ideologies and rituals. In Bourdier's vocabulary, the ways parents within each of these sub-cultures (habitus) perceive parental involvement in their children's education and the actual action of involvement are "cultural practices" and/or "cultural rituals." The influences of habitus on such cultural rituals work through factors such as: the general attitude of the community towards parental participation and the forms and frequency of the other parents' involvement actions. Since the cultural norms and rituals in urban areas generally reflect impersonal social relationships and less attachment to local communities, urban parents are hypothesized to be less likely to participate in school-related activities (e.g. helping with after-school activities, visiting the school on one's own, etc.). By contrast, cultural norms emphasizing intimate inter-personal relationships and close attachment to local communities are more likely to occur in smaller and less organizationally complex environments. Thus to the extent those norms affect parental involvement in school activities, it is hypothesized that such involvement should be greater in rural schools/communities.

Second, as some previous studies demonstrate (e.g., Buttle et al., 1979; Wasserman 1982; Tsai and Sigelman 1982; Nelson 1978), community attachment is much weaker in urban than in rural areas. From the perspective of Coleman's model, this suggests the existence of less social capital at the community level in urban areas. This lack of community social network hinders information flows among parents and weakens the community's capacity to activate possible cultural resources to promote active involvement. By contrast, the closer social attachment to the local community often identified with smaller rural localities not only enables rural parents to share their views and practices regarding parental involvement among themselves, but also facilitate the community to organize and promote community-level involvement activities. In short, given the expected different distribution of 'cultural' and 'social' capital in urban and rural areas, we hypothesize that:

H1. Holding constant parents' individual social/cultural characteristics, parents living in rural communities are more likely to participate in school-related activities than their urban counterparts.

In addition to the investigations of the possible contextual effects of geography, the present study also aims to test the systemic hypothesis. Since length of residency enhances potential for greater accumulation and investment of social capital, it is likely that parents who live in a community for a longer period of time would participate more in social activities, including those organized by local schools, than those newcomers. Thus, we also hypothesize that:

H2. Holding constant parents' individual social/cultural characteristics, parents who live in a district for a longer period of time are more likely to participate in school-related activities than parents whose residency is shorter.

Finally, we argue that some individual parental characteristics, e.g. income, education, may vary in their influence of parental involvement across different geographic locations. Since this part of the study is explorative, we will not state specific hypotheses.

METHOD

Sample and Data

The data used in the current study came from the Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP). Supported by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, this project aims to evaluate the quality of education within each of Missouri's 536 school districts following a five-year cycle. In order to facilitate the evaluation process, questionnaires pertaining to 17 different school positions (including students, parents, teachers and administrators) were developed and are administered prior to assessment of each school district.

The current study is based on the responses from parents living in the stratified random sample of school districts that participated in the MSIP project during the 1992-93 school year. The final sample includes 56935 parents from 296 schools. Four demographic aspects were stratified according to the population in the state of Missouri[1]: (a) geographic location; (b) student enrollment; (c) type of school and (d) percent of minorities. Within each strata, schools were randomly selected with probabilities proportional to the total number of schools in that category. In stratus with only a small number of schools, schools were disproportionally over-sampled in order to include these kinds of schools in our analyses. To compensate for unequal probabilities associated with including certain schools, school-level weights were calculated and used in our regression analyses.

All students in the selected schools took home the MSIP parent questionnaire. The completed questionnaires were sealed and returned to the MSIP personnel. The average response rate in our sample is 60.49 percent.

Measures

Dependent Variable. The primary dependent variable is parent involvement in school-related activities. The MSIP parent questionnaire contains five items designed to measure the extent of such involvement. These questions ask how often parents: go to an open house at school, attend parent/teacher meetings, visit the school, talk with teachers and help with after-school activities. Each item is measured by a four-point Likert scale (1=never and 4=frequently). Since we are more

interested in parental involvement in general than in involvement by type, we constructed an additive composite, with a higher value representing more overall involvement. The reliability for this composite is adequate (alpha = 0.77), indicating a high internal consistency among the five indicators.

Independent Variables. The major variable in the systemic model is length of residence (1=under 5 years; 2=6 to 10 years; 3=11 to 15 years and 4=over 15 years) and respondents' age (1=under 29; 2=30 to 39; 3=40 to 49; 4=50 to 59 and 5=60 or over), is also included. Also included as an independent variable is the geographic location of a school to which parents send their children. However, the measure of school location has been problematic for us. One major difficulty lies in the variation found within the widely used urban versus rural and metropolitan versus non-metropolitan classifications (for a detailed discussion of such disparities, see Elder 1992). The metropolitan-non-metropolitan classification pertains to counties while the rural-urban typology refers to places. Thus, the two dichotomies are not mutually exclusive; they are embedded in each other. In the present study, we combine these two classifications. Based on the geographic characteristics of a school's county and its specific location within the county, schools included in our sample were classified into four groups: metropolitan urban, metropolitan rural, non-metropolitan urban and non-metropolitan rural. With this combination, rural schools located in relatively isolated parts of large metropolitan county can be differentiated from schools located in an urban part of the same metropolitan county. By the same token, schools that are obviously located in an urban part of a non-metropolitan county can also be distinguished from those located in more remote, rural ares of the same county.

Control Variables. To test the effects of our independent variables, control variables are introduced into our analysis to exclude possible spurious effects. We first include two measures of social capital: single-parent status (1=single-households; 0=other types of households) and number of children in the family. According to Coleman (1987), single parenthood and large family size both represent in family structure characteristics which can contribute to diverting adults' time and

attention away from the school-aged student. Thus, parents who lack such family social capital can be expected to be less involved in school matters than parents from intact families.

We also include a measure of parent socio-economic status. According to Lareau (1987; 1989), socio-economic status directly reflects a family's investment in cultural capital, which largely predicts frequency and forms of parental involvement. The SES composite measure has two components: parents' educational attainment (ordinally measured as: elementary school; some high school; high school graduation; some college; college graduate and graduate school) and household annual income. In order to be consistent with the procedures used by widely cited national data sets (e.g. National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988) in constructing the SES composite, each item is standardized to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 1. All non-missing components are then averaged. Respondents missing all components were excluded from the sample.

Student minority status (1=African and Hispanic American; 0=others) and student's age (measured by the grade a student is enrolled) are also included as control measures.

Finally, we include the parent's response to a statement that school staff can be easily accessed (ordinally measured as 1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Previous research (e.g. Epstein 1990; Lareau 1987, 1989) has underscored the dramatic effects of school staff's attitudes on parental involvement. Here, we treat it as a control variable to exclude possible spurious effects. Table 1 summarizes the basic statistics of all the variables used in the analysis. We also report these statistics by the geographic location of schools.

RESULTS

Table 2 summarizes the regression coefficients of all the effects included in the model.

Control Variables

Our results lend consistent support to Lareau's cultural capital argument. As Table 2 illustrates, independent of other factors included in the regression equation, each unit increase in SES can be translated into 1.4 unit increase in involvement. Similarly, African and Hispanic Americans participate 0.8 unit less than their white counterparts. In addition, Coleman's notion of

social capital is also supported. For instance, single parents on average score 0.37 units lower in our involvement scale than parents from other types of households. To a much lesser extent, number of children in the family also has a negative effect on involvement.

Parental involvement in school activities also decreases with children's age. In our model, each year increase in students' age accounts for about 0.25 unit decrease in parental involvement. Finally, parents who report they can talk to school staff more easily involve themselves more than parents who report otherwise.

Independent Variables

Our findings also support both of our two major hypotheses. Holding constant the control variables, parents whose children go to non-metropolitan rural schools scored 0.5 to 0.8 units higher in the involvement scale than parents whose children go to other types of schools. At the same time, independent of individual characteristics and location of residence, parents who have lived longer within the school district participate more than parents who are new to the district.

Interactive Effects

In addition to direct effects, we also explore possible interactive effects between some parents' individual characteristics (SES, length of residence and age) and their residential location. Only SES shows a consistent and statistically significant interactive effect. As Table 2 demonstrates, the SES slope is steeper in non-metropolitan rural than in other types of communities. In other words, the effect of SES on parents' participation frequency varies across geographic locations; it is greater in non-metropolitan rural schools than in other schools. This is a finding which will be explored in greater detail in other analyses we are conducting. The complete model has explained about 18 percent of the variable on frequencies of the parent participation scale.

DISCUSSION

During the last few years, a noticeable branch of sociology of education research has turned to focus on the effects of living and interacting in a given social context on students academic achievement (e.g. Lee and Raudenbush 1989; Garner and Raudenbush 1991), on teachers'

perceived efficacy (e.g. Lee, Dedrick and Smith 1991; Raudenbush, Rowan and Cheong 1992), on students' TV watching behavior (Sun, Hobbs, Elder and Li *in press*), etc. Joining this research trend, the current study demonstrated further how the 'contextual' effect of residence location influences parents' school involvement. In addition, we have also found evidence to support the systemic hypothesis.

However, the mechanisms through which "contextual" effects of residence work deserve greater attention. Previous community-attachment research tends to emphasize either ecological or demographic/life-style differences. In this study, we extend these arguments and incorporate them with Lareau and Coleman's elaborations of cultural and social capital (Lareau 1987; 1989; Coleman 1988). Both kinds of capital can be accumulated within the family or the community. Within urban communities, cultural values and norms pertaining to interpersonal relationships can diminish social participation (Tomeh 1964). Thus, urban parents may lack not only the cultural capital of community that may motivate participation, but also a cohesive community network that can reinforce enacting available cultural resources. However, caution should be taken when interpreting this finding. In this study, we have only investigated parental involvement in school related activities which require inter-personal contact. Such involvement activities are obviously more sensitive to environmental factors than involvement activities within the family (e.g. helping the elementary grade children with their homework, helping high school students plan their career, etc.). The extent of beneficial family involvement in affecting student performance is only partially accounted for in this analysis. More detailed investigation is needed to study possible contextual effects on other types of involvement.

In this study, we suggest that the two approaches to community attachment may be complementary rather than substitutive to one another, at least as they are applied to studying parents' participation in school activities. One reason for arguing that the effects of length and location of residence are additive is that they operate at different levels. As operationalized by most of community attachment studies, length of residence is an *individual* characteristic and its effect, if any, should only influence a given individual. By contrast, the effect of residence location is

contextual; it reflects how an individual within a given social-economic-cultural environment may be influenced by the characteristics of *others*, *independent* of his or her own individual characteristics (Sampson 1988). The contextual and individual effects can be additive to one another. As illustrated in this study, the effect of individual characteristics (e.g., residence length, SES, etc.) remains after controlling the environmental effect (e.g. residence location), and vice versa.

Third, the current study has also found that parents' SES has a stronger effect on involvement in non-metropolitan rural schools than in other types of schools. Two interpretations are possible. First, as mentioned earlier, the cultural norms in urban areas can be detrimental to social participation. Consequently such negative "contextual" effects could have relatively greater "off-setting" effects on middle-class parents, who might otherwise be predisposed to participate more frequently than lower income parents. In other words, different from the situation in rural areas, the social context in urban areas could contribute to a relative depreciation of cultural capital.

Secondly opportunities for social participation, including school, are more constrained in the rural environment, more abundant and diverse in the urban environment. Relatively the school and school activities occupy a more prominent place in the social life of rural localities. The relative absence of alternatives for participation may contribute to greater parental participation in school activities independent of other influencing factors. Concurrently because of the greater visibility and centrality of the school whatever factors contribute to the negative effect of SES on parental involvement may exert a more powerful effect in the more socially constrained rural locality.

In general these findings may help account for why students of smaller rural schools typically perform better than would be expected from a comparative analysis of rural-urban educational resources.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics by Geographical Location

	Metro-Urban (n=28905)		N-Metro Urban (n=11527)		Metro-Rural (n=4870)		N-Metro Rural (n=11633)		Total Sample (n=56935)	
Variables	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Involvement Composite:	13.92	3.39	13.88	3.64	13.81	3.52	14.07	3.50	13.93	3.47
Student Grade:	5.11	3.16	5.48	3.20	4.99	2.99	5.67	3.37	5.30	3.21
Minority:	0.21	0.40	0.06	0.25	0.02	0.13	0.03	0.15	0.12	0.33
Length of Residence:	2.34	1.19	2.77	1.34	2.44	1.20	2.71	1.22	2.52	1.24
Number of Children:	2.44	1.22	2.38	1.25	2.39	1.10	2.44	1.14	2.42	1.21
SES Composite:	0.11	0.87	-.05	0.93	0.06	0.74	-.25	0.73	0.00	0.86
Single Parent Status:	0.26	0.43	0.18	0.41	0.13	0.33	0.14	0.34	0.21	0.41
Can talk to school staff	4.20	0.82	4.12	0.89	4.17	0.85	4.18	0.82	4.18	0.84

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Tables 2

Regression Coefficients on Parental Involvement in School-related Activities

Indepdent Varaibles	Coefficient	Standard Error
Intercept:	13.23***	0.11
Minority status	-0.78***	0.04
Students' grade	-0.25***	0.01
Length of residence	0.15***	0.01
Number of Children	-0.03***	0.01
SES composite	1.40***	0.04
Single-parent status	-0.37***	0.04
Can talk to school staff	0.66***	0.02
Residence Location		
Metro-urban	-0.50***	0.04
N-Metro-urban	-0.47***	0.04
Metro-rural	-0.80***	0.06
N-Metro-rural	0.00	/
SES*Residence Location		
Metro-urban	-0.48***	0.05
N-Metro-urban	-0.25***	0.05
Metro-rural	-0.65***	0.07
N-Metro-rural	0.00	/

Notes:

1. $R^2 = 0.178$
2. *** $p < 0.0001$

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